

John 1:19-34 – John’s Testimony, Our Testimony

Slide 1

This morning, we return to our study of the Gospel of John after a couple weeks off. It seems fitting that as we talk again about John the Baptist as we have another baptism! Last time we spoke about how The Baptist prepared us to see why Jesus was rejected, as John was showing the Jewish leaders how they had idolized their identities, and so would not admit that they needed to humble themselves and accept God’s grace yet again. We too, like the Jewish leaders, might idolize our identities in different ways, by thinking our baptism is something that we do rather than God’s gracious action for us.

Today, we continue looking at John the Baptist, this time focusing on his testimony. John proclaims that Jesus is the Lamb of God, and that with Jesus’ baptism, there comes the Holy Spirit. Here we see a deepened view of who Jesus is, and who we are before him. John the Baptist teaches us how we should view ourselves before Jesus, and how we should respond to him. John teaches us how to testify to Jesus. Our acceptance of Jesus comes in seeing him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

John 1:19-34

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Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

²¹ They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²² Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

²⁶ “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

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John depicts this scene where an envoy of Pharisees sent to interview John the Baptist. They want to know who he is and what he’s doing baptizing people in the wilderness. You might remember from the last sermon on John’s gospel a couple weeks ago that John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling the Jewish people to not take for granted their status as God’s people, but recognize that they are who they are as a gift of God. That is what John’s baptism signified, that they needed to come before God as Gentiles, or God’s people requiring to pass through the Jordan yet again.

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While the Old Testament Prophets were given the ability to tell of Jesus’ coming in the future, John the Baptist was able to testify to Jesus’ coming by pointing at him in person. As we look at John’s testimony, three things stand out. First, we note his humility, an essential aspect of anyone coming before God rightly. Second, we see John being able to point to the scriptures and see Jesus, something that the Jewish leaders should have been able to do too. Third, we see John recognizing his place as preparing a way for Jesus’ baptism with the Spirit.

All three of these are part of John’s testimony. Notice what is missing, John doesn’t speak about himself. John’s testimony is all about Jesus, who he is preparing the way for. He later says famously, “He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn.3:30). In this I think we get a very helpful corrective to our spiritual lives. How many of us, when we think of our testimonies, think about ourselves first?

I remember hearing a funny story of a boy who grew up in a Reformed house, with a Reformed pastor as a father, where the catechism was taken very seriously, and had recently started attending an evangelical day-school. In one Bible class everyone was supposed to go around and give their testimony. Each kid in their turn told the story of how they decided to accept Jesus as their personal saviour. When it came time for the boy to give his testimony, he stood up, wondering what to say, and said, “I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful saviour, Jesus Christ...” The son was embarrassed as he told the story to his dad that evening.

The kid, who had never had to speak about his faith as his life story, didn't know what to say, so he gave the first answer to the Heidelberg Catechism. When the dad was telling the story, he noted that though it is cute, it is actually very significant that the boy did this. To the boy, what Jesus had done for him was far more important than his response to God. Of course, it is a good practice to look back on your life and see how God has brought you to where you are today, and it can be very helpful to others for them to hear this story. But it is much more important for our testimonies to be about Jesus than about ourselves. Our humility should mark our understanding of our salvation at every point, just as it did John's.

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Jesus calls John the Baptist the greatest person born of a woman (Mt.11:11), but John does nothing but point to his Lord. In this we see a model of what our testimonies ought to look like, never pointing to ourselves, but constantly pointing to Jesus and what he has done for us. This is true greatness in the Kingdom of God, constantly pointing to Jesus.

John tells of his humble position before the Lord by saying that he isn't even fit to untie Jesus' sandals. In Jewish culture at this time, it was seen as beneath a Jewish slave to be asked to untie the sandals and wash the feet of their master. It was too shameful ask a fellow Jew to do. Jewish people could ask their gentile slaves to do this task, but not their Jewish ones. Here, John is saying yet again that his place is one of supreme humility before Jesus, which of course is appropriate since he is God.

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There is a curiosity in this text that we should address, even if it is a little bit of a sidetrack, I don't want confusion over this point. John here says that he is not Elijah, but Jesus, in Matthew 11:14, says that he is. What are we to make of this?

In Malachi 4:5 it says, "I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." Because of this, the Jewish leaders were always on the lookout for some Elijah-like figure, doing miracles and prophesying. John is this person in some way, even if he doesn't recognize it himself.

In what sense is it possible that John could be Elijah? To get one thing straight, we do not believe in reincarnation. I once had someone use this text to say some early Christians believe in reincarnation, but this is not true and well repudiated. As the Angel said to Zechariah, John's father, in Luke 1:17, John came in the "spirit and power of Elijah."

The "spirit and power of Elijah" was once given in "double portion" to Elijah's disciple Elisha (2Kings 2:9-14), an now it seems to be on John the Baptist. To John, this is not something

that ought to be focused on, rather, in John's humility he points to his place as preparing the way.

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This brings us to the second aspect of John's testimony important for us, John is able to point to the scriptures and see Jesus. In this passage we see John pointing to three passages from Isaiah that are essential in understanding who Jesus is.

When John says that he is a "voice of one calling in the wilderness, make straight the way for the Lord," he is quoting Isaiah 40:3. Here, Isaiah is speaking about preparing for the coming Messiah, who will bring God's salvation into fruition. The image is of a group of exiles stuck in Babylon looking for a way back to the Promised Land. Of course, the reason the Jews are in exile to begin with is their sin, so to come back from exile, this must be accounted for.

The Baptist then points to how the Messiah will save his people, both by being "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and by baptizing us "with the Holy Spirit." Both of these are part of our salvation, the Lamb to cleanse us from our sin, and the Spirit to remake us.

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In John's humility he recognizes that he needs the true sacrifice, *the* Lamb of God. Here John is most likely pointing to Isaiah 53, the famous song of the Suffering Servant. Isaiah says that the servant will be "led like a lamb to the slaughter" and through this "Lord makes his life an offering for sin..." John might not have known exactly what this meant, as in other gospels it seems to be confused by Jesus' need to suffer and die (Mt. 11:2-19), but he does know that these passages point to his need for what Jesus is bringing, something that the Jewish leaders lacked because of their hubris.

John's humility in seeing his need for Jesus' sacrifice in his testimony should also show us our need for humility in accepting Christ's sacrifice. John says that the whole reason he was "baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." Like John, all of what we do should also be to reveal Jesus to the world.

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This leads us to our last point, it was through John's baptism of Jesus that he recognized who he was, and why he is so important, not only as the lamb, but as the bringer of the Holy Spirit.

At Jesus' baptism John sees "the Spirit come down on him as a dove and remain on him." John is told that it is this person who will bring the promised Holy Spirit baptism, rather than his baptism, which was merely of repentance.

Here John points to another passage in Isaiah, 42:1, which says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations." John recognizes that the servant who is the Lamb, must also be the one who brings the Spirit.

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We might ask, why a dove? Augustine spends an entire sermon on the Holy Spirit as a dove, I will be a little kinder to you. He begins by saying that even the dove's coo points us heavenward. As the dove's coo is soothing, the Spirit is a comforter, but the coo has a sense of yearning. It is peaceful, but melancholy. This is the place of the Christian, a person of peace, but constantly recognizing sin in the world and themselves, and yearning for our true home.

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The clearest reason as to why the Spirit takes the form of a dove is to draw a connection between Jesus' baptism and Noah's flood. The dove in Noah's story comes back to the ark with an olive branch, to tell Noah that the flood waters are receding.

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The flood itself is a kind of re-creation and cleansing of the world. You might remember in the second verse of the Bible, the Spirit is said to hover over the waters. Genesis 8 makes this allusion to creation explicit when it says that Noah first lets the dove out, it flies around and can't find place to perch, so he takes it back in. Seven days later, Noah does this again, and the dove returns with the olive branch. That it takes *seven* days should not be lost on us.

This is important to recognize because it points to the very nature of our baptism. The work of the Spirit is not just a cosmic thing, creating the world, but it is also a personal thing, re-creating us. Just as the world was cleansed and re-created in the flood, so we are cleansed and re-created in baptism. Romans 5 says Jesus is the new Adam, and through our union with him by the Spirit in baptism, we die to our old selves and are raised with him. In many ways we are the first fruits of the new creation as a whole. This cleansing and re-creating is a work of the Spirit in our lives. Jesus can pave the way for this work because he has taken our sin upon himself.

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You might remember that after the waters of the flood, God gives Noah the sign of the rainbow as a promise that he will not destroy the world again. Now when we call a rainbow a bow, what kind of bow are we talking about? It isn't the kind of bow that's on a present, but the kind of bow that one would shoot an arrow. Now, when we look at a rainbow, what direction is that bow cocked towards? That's right, to heaven.

God makes a covenant with Noah that he will not again destroy the earth, not because he felt bad about it the first time, he didn't, and humanity deserved it. Not only that, but we still deserve to be destroyed. But God gives us the sign of a rainbow to say the next time he rends the heavens and comes down with his wrath it will be with a bow pointed toward heaven, at himself, he will take the punishment that we owe on himself. This is the baptism of the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, as John says. We are baptized in his blood.

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John recognizes that Jesus is the one with the Spiritual baptism as he says, "I should be baptized by you." John says this because he knows that his own baptism, of repentance, cannot bring the Holy Spirit. This is unlike the baptism of Jesus, which brings the Spirit onto a person, re-creating him.

John's baptism was good for its time, but it is not the baptism that we have now, where God renews us with his Spirit. John's baptism of repentance, saying that you need to come to God afresh like a gentile, is important for the Jewish people as they prepared for Jesus to come, but the preparation is not the coming. In our baptism, it is not us who do the work, we are baptized by the Lord. Sure, you might see me here pouring a little humble water, but the reality is that God is marking little Olivia for his own. This so much more powerful than a simple marking of repentance.

That is why infant baptism is so special, we see how helpless we are to save ourselves; it is God who does everything. I ask you, do you have the power to be born again? Are you able re-create yourself? Only God can do this, only God can take a simple sign and fill it with his Spirit. Through these simple, humble, ordinary things, we see God working powerfully.

Our humility should mimic the signs themselves, just like John shows us. This is the testimony of John the Baptist, the greatest man to come out of a woman. Constantly pointing to the Lord, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." The Lord "who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." Let us learn from our forebearer, and point to the Lord with our testimony as well.

If John, the foremost of the prophets, one able to see Jesus in the word unlike all others around him, is not worthy to unstrap the sandal. If he is unable to save himself. If he has the humility to know that his testimony should not be centred on himself, but on Jesus, how much more should we?

I will invite the singers to come up after the prayer.